



The Woman of the Moment

By Izola Forrester

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EVEN before her arrival at Willow Way the situation between herself and Marbury had become intolerable. It needed merely this one last, lawless adventure to make it impossible for her to face the future as his wife.

Looking back afterward, she remembered that Hanson was not there to meet her. One of the newer chauffeurs had been sent. A small thing to irritate one, but Marbury knew her preference for Hanson. She took the telegram the man gave her, glanced at its brief line under the arc light, and stepped into the car.

Come back to-night. Important. B.

Curious, Blair wiring her when she had seen him that afternoon. He had not wanted her to leave New York, to renew, even as camouflage in the eyes of the world, the marriage relation between Marbury and herself. Yet Diane had deliberately sparred with Fate for time on the ultimate choice. She slipped the folded telegram into her suède hand bag, and watched the curving shore drive unroll before the speeding car.

Not from any consideration or love for Marbury, this home-coming, she told herself. Since that night three months back, when she had been an accidental witness to one of his town parties, forgiveness or compromise had been out of the question.

Nor had Marbury even asked for a reconciliation. On the contrary, he had taken the attitude of the injured party because of Blair. Blair. She closed

her eyes wearily. Was he always to be the danger issue between them? There had always been Blair Barrett in her life. She had never for an instant considered giving up her right to his friendship. It was utterly absurd of Marbury to associate her liking for him and their old comradeship with anything sentimental. In fact, there was a distant cousinship mixed up with it somewhere, she believed, quite enough of a tie to warrant her appropriation of his eternal attentions at her need or whim.

They had lived in the same section of Belair, below New Orleans, throughout her childhood. During the school period had come intermittent reunions, always with the mutual understanding and a certain code between them of liking and loyalty. It was tacitly understood that Blair was to be forever hopelessly in love, but that was all. She was the remote princess in his life, distractingly aloof, unattainable, glorified by her disdain of love.

The vibration of the motor soothed her taut nerves. She felt herself relaxing, slipping away from the heartache of the present into the old security of her girlhood. What was next? Oh, yes, she remembered when Blair had come to see her the night he left for France. The Aërial, of course, he told her. He was nineteen then, a pattern for a prince of dreams; still she had never felt one thousandth part of the love or thrill for him that was Marbury's for the winning.

When he had returned she was out

of the old eddy, a girl just topping twenty, getting her final touches in New York for a successful *début* with the Sevriers behind her, and old Anne Gresham, her father's aunt, ready to steer her through shoal water. The first time her great-aunt's eyes had classified Diane, slender, vivid, restive, thoroughbred, like all Sevrier women, she had visualized her possibilities, and had taken her back home with her, away from the old bay estate in Louisiana, where the greatest excitement had been the yacht races at Pontchartrain.

She had not seen Blair until the next summer when he ran up to Newport on Jerry Fallows' yacht—Jerry had married his sister. There was gossip about Ines trying desperately to reinstate her brother after the Dutton affair. Diane was fully acquainted with all the details. Blair had fallen into an aftermath romance with Wanda Dutton. After discovering their two-week sojourn in Paris, Colonel Dutton had named Blair in his divorce suit. The odd part, Diane thought, was that Wanda married young Boyle at Nice the week following the final decree. It took the edge off Blair's culpability, but Anne Gresham said briefly that he had bad form.

Blair had stared at her with frank admiration and curiosity the day he met her on the stone steps that led to the sea pool. She had the same deep-toned coloring he remembered, golden tan with an underlay of rose; the same great, dark eyes so flashingly unexpected in their challenge when they granted one notice; the abundant, yellow hair that had always reminded him of the old Provence ballad about one "Fair Yoland with ye golden hair." And there was the old audacity, too. She had given him a slim, cool hand in welcome.

"You've made a monkey of yourself, I hear, Blair. Trespassing. You're off Aunt Anne's books, know it? Can't

you experiment without explosions? Better keep away from Greystone. I don't just like you either, any more."

The following spring she had married Marbury Meade. She had met him at the Gresham cottage at Palm Beach. The picked candidate, Blair told her savagely the day of the wedding, when he had caught her for an instant at the foot of the stairs. And while she had hesitated, pitying and wondering, too, at the look in his eyes, Marbury had sauntered in behind them, tall, lean, splendidly fit and young, his long, heavily lashed gray eyes taking in the picture without expression.

How Blair had hated the other's easy assumption of authority over her. They were too much alike, he had told her, ever to find permanent happiness together. Neither one knew restraint or opposition. Even Anne Gresham had smiled grimly to Ines after the pair had departed.

"If they manage to keep the same tempo for a year it will be a miracle, but they're a smashing pair, aren't they? I couldn't resist it."

The car swerved off the shore drive into the turnpike hillward, barely avoiding collision with a red, underslung two seater that was recklessly beating down the grade on high. In the instant of meeting Diane caught a glimpse of Derry Morgan, his flash of recognition of her face in the coupé, and the eager gesture of welcome he sent after her.

She wondered what he was doing on the road to Willow Way at that hour. He was a friend, or rather a political protégé, of Marbury; a young local lawyer, who, through his own popularity and Marbury's influence, had won the post of assistant district attorney. Her thoughts veered to this trait of decency about her husband, his unselfishness, his interest in the success of others. He had even been fair to Blair when his own firm of lawyers, Forbes & Forbes, had taken Blair in.

He might easily have stopped it. And he was aware that Blair's chief object in entering a New York firm was to be near her.

"I don't blame him," he had said once when the issue had risen of her continuing the friendship with Blair. "He's just a poor fool adoring what he imagines is a star. I think I'm damned decent about it, myself, only don't you two hold any tender rendezvous around my house. That's out!"

He blurred the whole question purposely, she had told herself as they neared the breaking point through the winter season. He dallied with the situation deliberately, inflicting a peculiar retaliation on her, which others would not understand. If she insisted on her right to see Blair whenever it pleased her, then he would exercise the same right with his women friends.

The difference was, she told herself passionately, that neither Blair nor she were in any wise wrong, while her husband's affairs had become the talk of every tea-table group around New York.

She stared out at the widening arc of light sent forth by the car over the smooth roadway. It was deliciously restful, this slipping through the velvet-dark silence. She recalled the night when Marbury had brought her home. They had not spoken to each other for miles. She had lain back in his arms, their lips seeking long, thrilling contact, an unutterable peace and safety possessing her in her new wifehood.

And now—— Her lips curved in a half smile. There had been Clare Chetwood. Marbury had been the talk of Palm Beach for a week after his house boat caught fire, and there had followed a spectacular rescue of Clare, when she was supposed to have been bound for the North on the afternoon train. His excuse had been delightfully naïve. Clare had given up her rooms at the hotel. Everything was crowded.

She had to stay over until the morning train. He had merely offered her the use of the house boat, and taken her out to it, that was all.

"Great Scott, Di, you think evil of every other woman but yourself!" he had said calmly. "Clare's a good old scout. I saw a lot of her on the other side. We're regular buddies."

Another time, at Willow Way, she had invited several women from a set she disliked and avoided, because he had asked her to. After a delay in town she had come out in Blair's car around one in the morning, and had found a quiet little high-stake bridge party in Marbury's room, the women in negligee, the men laughing at their host's imitation of a seal balancing a ball on his nose.

Repelled and disgusted, she had been silent as Blair said good night. It was part of the hour and the mood that she promised to meet him in town for dinner the following week.

They had gone to a place in the East Fifties, upstairs in an old brownstone building which still retained its air of residential seclusion. Blair told her it filled up after midnight, but around seven they were nearly alone except for two absorbed couples in twilight-shadowed corners. Before she realized it he had heard from her own lips her admission of her unhappiness, of Marbury's careless delinquencies, no proven infelicities, but jauntings into forbidden areas.

"If he would only be content with the——" She checked herself. "Other men have friendships with women of their own class, flirtations, borderland affairs that keep away from this other sort of thing, but Marbury gets into unspeakable messes. He was arrested in November for speeding along the Merrick turnpike. There was a girl from the Winter Garden with him. He told me the wildest story to get out of it. Said her sister was in the Mineola hos-

pital and the poor kid had to get out to see her. His alibis always have the human appeal. Just now it is Gioja, a South American dancer. He is helping her get into the new 'Revue.' I believe she supports her mother and seven little brothers down in Rio. Do you know her, Blair?"

Blair had been cautious in his reply. He said that Gioja was the latest feature of the midnight revue in a certain well-known restaurant. Marbury had been seen at the place, he believed. That was all.

His reticence had aroused Diane's resentment more than any direct accusation could have done. There had come over her a sense of helplessness, of useless resistance. Why should she cling to the semblance of wedlock between Marbury and herself when everybody knew the truth? Her aunt had already told her she would not be blamed for taking any step to free herself.

"Diane, my dear, the day has passed, thank Heaven, when the world expects any woman to become a willing sacrifice on any altar of mistaken duty. Marriage may be based upon divine law, but, personally, I think it criminal to live on in the so-called holy bonds when you lose all self-respect and merely descend to a mutual tolerance or even loathing. Marbury seems to be suffering from some reactionary complex. I'd let him go."

Unconsciously, as she remembered these things, Diane's ungloved hand rose to her bare throat, closing around it as if to stop the choking contractions of pain that came to her often now, like the tangible expression of the bitterness she repressed. No doubt she had been to blame in going to the house in town after dinner, with Blair accompanying her. It had been a foolish move after Marbury had warned her, even though they were both innocent.

She had decided she would go to Anne Gresham at once, but there were

certain papers and letters of a private nature in her desk at the town house that she wanted. Turning to Blair, she told him her plan eagerly, her untasted dinner pushed back from her, as she planned her escape. As she argued with him the years slipped by. She was back at Belair, coaxing him into some indiscretion they both would have to pay for. At last he had agreed to go with her.

It had not been late when their car stopped before the four-story, Italian-style house. None of the servants ever noticed her unexpected arrivals. Both Marbury and herself were given to doing the unusual. She had opened the entrance doors with her own keys; first the outer vestibule, then the inner, heavy oak pair that led directly into the small, stucco-walled reception hall.

Here Blair had waited while she went up the narrow, circular staircase alone. There had not been the slightest attempt on his part to take advantage of the moment. He knew her moods. As she reached the landing at the second floor, she turned to go up to her own suite at the rear of the house, overlooking its terraced garden. A glimmer of light under the door of Marbury's study caught her eye. She had hesitated, listening intently. It had never occurred to her that he would be at the house at that hour.

She had heard the sound of girls' laughter, the low throbbing of guitars, broken snatches of singing. Following her first overpowering urge, she had walked down the hall and opened the door quietly on the scene within.

Marbury's back was turned toward her. He was applauding heavily. Half a dozen people were dancing. On a side table stood an assortment of Marbury's best attempts at cocktail mixing. Two Argentina boys played guitars, leaning back against the wall, slender, indifferent, their black eyes watching her with an inscrutable expression.

But it had been the girl at the head of the room who had held Diane's attention. She had known instinctively that this was the woman they called Gioja. Thin, silent, not beautiful by any standard, but disturbingly provocative. She was wrapped in a long cloak of rust-colored velvet, heavily fringed in gold; her short, black hair upcurling about her pointed, expressive face, her eyes frowning at the figure in the darkened doorway.

It had all happened with amazing suddenness. Marbury, catching the contagion of stilled voices, saw her, and stared in blurred disbelief. Then there had come the whirling glass from Gioja's hand aimed at the intruder's white face, breaking to crystal splinters above her head. And last of all—the unspeakable, shameful tang of it all—Marbury as he sprang across the room and struck the dancer across her parted lips with the back of his hand.

Blair had heard the disturbance and come after her. Against Marbury's opposition, he had led her down to the waiting car, and sat beside her silently on the long ride to Willow Way. He had never seemed so necessary to her in all her life as during that lonely hour. Yet he had never alluded to what they had both witnessed.

Marbury, in place of remorse or self-reproach, had met her the following day, amused and skeptical over her own motive in coming to the house with Blair. Regretted that he had spoiled her plans for a little impromptu conference. Explained carelessly that he had given a dinner that evening, had promised his guests some special private stock, and had led the adjournment to his own house with no thought of any possible interference with her own plans.

She listened to him in silence. Why, it was too absurd! Blair—— She faced her husband with an incredulous smile, puzzled brows pointing above

eyes that accused him openly of disloyalty. He *could* not be serious.

And Marbury's answer. It came back to her now with all its taunting menace.

"No?" he had queried. "So damned serious, my dear girl, that if you dare start anything I'll finish it with a whirl that will make you leave the country, even if you choose to marry Blair Barrett in France. Perhaps by the time you get a divorce history may have repeated itself."

She knew he was referring to the Dutton affair. The imputation had left her heartsick and on the defensive. Not only the scene she had stumbled on, but Marbury's interpretation of her presence there. Whatever he chose to do, she told herself, it was absolutely unsportsmanlike of him to try to lessen his own wrongdoing by snaring her into a compromising situation.

The swing of the car around the curving driveway aroused her. It was good to be here in the seclusion of Willow Way for a couple of months. She renewed a promise she had made herself to rest and relax, and forget, while she was here this time. As she went up the broad stone steps she thought she saw a figure standing in the shadow of the tall shrubbery. It looked familiar, too, but as she hesitated the front doors opened and Mrs. Cressy, the housekeeper, smiled at her in comforting serenity. She had come to Willow Way from Belair the year after Diane's marriage. Madame Sevrier had sent her as a deputy guardian.

"Beloved child, let Cressy look after you and save you small worries. You will make me happy by trusting her," she had told Diane.

It was delightfully restful now to find herself petted and cared for. She accepted Cressy's word that she must have dinner served to her in her own rooms, where she could lie on the couch and relax utterly.

"What time did Mr. Meade leave?"

she asked, as Mrs. Cressy lingered in the soft-toned, restful sitting room.

"He was here around one o'clock, I think, ma'am, maybe later."

"Really?" Diane's brows contracted. "What detained him, I wonder?"

"I'm sure I don't know, unless it was because he wanted to see Mr. Morgan."

"About what?" She remembered the flash of Derry's face as he had passed her on the drive. "You wouldn't know, of course, Cressy, but I wish he had gone yesterday."

"Yes, ma'am, I know." Mrs. Cressy stood near the door leading to the hallway, with a listening air. "If you'll excuse me for a few moments, I'll be right back."

Diane hardly heard her. She was annoyed at Marbury for staying on at Willow Way until almost the hour of her arrival. He was getting to the stage of petty irritations. She closed her eyes, her arms clasped beneath her head, her dinner untouched on the tempting tray beside her. And suddenly there seeped through the many partitions, the sound of voices raised in dispute. She lifted herself on the cushions, listening intently. And the memory of the figure she had observed lingering in the tall shadow of the rhododendrons recurred to her.

The sounds rose in volume, one voice, Mrs. Cressy's, pitched higher than the rest—indignant, pleading, commanding. What was it? She rose and went to the door, opening it wide, getting the full benefit now of the excited commotion in the lower hall. The lights were half turned on. As she looked over the balustrade she saw Hanson dominating the scene, with Mrs. Cressy and the other chauffeur trying to persuade him to leave. Thorpe, too—she could see the tall, portly figure of the butler as he entered the telephone booth. Whom was he calling? And now Hanson's voice, guttural, threatening, rose to her.

"I tell you I bane going to see her! She bane going to know what goes on here while she's in town, that's all. I going to tell her all about my girl. You leave me be or, by Heaven, I bane going to break every damn' head here!"

She went down the stairs swiftly, her light chiffon-velvet negligee fluttering back from her shoulders like moth wings.

"Turn on the lights," she ordered quietly. "What is it, Hanson?"

At sight of her the chauffeur's manner changed. As he tried to speak, deep, breaking sobs stopped him. He held out his hands to her beseechingly.

"My little Velma, Mrs. Meade, she bane gone. That damned dog, your husband! Maybe Velma she kill herself. I going to get him, by——"

"Wait, please." The cool assurance of her tone quieted him. "Cressy, what is this? Tell me!"

The housekeeper's eyes looked oddly round and terrified, Diane thought. She had never seen her emotional before.

"Velma is missing, ma'am, but he ain't got any proof——"

"No?" Hanson's voice taunted her with its incredulity. "Then why is Morgan going to make him drag the lake to-morrow? He don't get away with it, I tell you. When they find my girl, I bane going to kill him myself!"

Diane shuddered as his words lost coherence. Sobbing, swearing, he heaped on Marbury every term he could think of. From the broken sentences she gathered that he was accusing her husband of the girl's disgrace and suicide. She moved away from Mrs. Cressy's outstretched arm.

"I'm quite all right, Cressy. I don't blame him if it's true. Get Thorpe for me."

"Long distance has been calling Mr. Meade. He's just answering it."

"He dank he save himself with all his money and lawyers! By Jove, I get

him before he get a chance to face any court——"

Hanson stopped with an effort, peering forward at some one who entered leisurely. It was Marbury, tall, assured, in his gay motoring coat, hatless, an unlighted cigar in the corner of his mouth. His eyes sought hers with a strange eagerness, she thought, but he faced the chauffeur in time to save himself from the attack. She closed her eyes as Hanson went down with a crash from Marbury's blow on the point of the jaw.

"Thorpe, look after him," he said briefly. "Come upstairs, Di, at once." When they were in her room he pulled the chain of the topaz-shaded drop light by the couch, shoved forward a gold-painted willow stool with his foot, and sat down. She noticed his pallor and nervousness without any personal feeling.

"I'm in a devil of a mix-up," he said unsteadily. "Derry was just up here, and I've wired Forbes to come back from Boston at once. Hanson's girl is missing, and he's gone crazy—accuses me of getting her into trouble. He found her cape by the shore of the lake, got drunk, and went to Derry with the charge against me. Derry just told me it's best to drag the lake to keep people from talking."

"What if they find her there?"

She stood before him, her face blanched white as the full significance of his words struck her. Velma Hanson, a girl she had befriended and protected. Hanson himself had come to her early in the spring, telling her the girl's mother had been wayward and left him. He had managed to get the child out of the institution where his wife had left her, and had tried to do the right thing by her, he said. She was only seventeen. Diane remembered how pretty she had seemed the day she came to see her, her hair a fluff of pale gold around a demure face of rose-

tinted fairness, her lips a trifle too full, her chin dimpled, receding. Thinking to put her where she would be safe, Diane had secured a place for her as lady's maid at the country club.

"They won't!" Marbury answered emphatically. "Di, listen to me——" He stopped, staring at her as she gazed at him, elusive, thoroughbred in her silver-gray gown. Her contempt and aloofness challenged him. After all, she was his wife. Before she suspected his intent he had her fast in his arms, and was kissing her forcibly. Yet she made no resistance. Her cool quiescence irritated him. As he released her she ignored him completely, switching on the light and taking her seat before the dressing table as she loosened her hair.

"What are you going to do?" he asked unsteadily.

"I am going back to New York tonight to the Greshams'."

"You can't, Di! Derry says it is absolutely necessary for you to stay here and do the regular thing, or the papers will get hold of it. She's had some fellow she was going to marry. Hanson told me all about him. He sent him away. Derry says to steer the suspicion to him."

"What do you mean exactly?" Her tone was cool and restrained.

"If she's been fool enough to try the lake."

"Have you been having an affair with her, too?" She forced herself to ask the question.

"I swear I haven't!" he shot back. "I've never even been alone with the girl. Hanson's always driven the car. She's just a pretty, beauty-starved little girl, Di. Wanted to study music. I paid for her lessons. You'd have done the same thing."

"Doubtless. You always have an alibi, don't you, Marbury?" She smiled scornfully at him in the mirror. "But I think this is about enough. I

am going back to town at once. I'll stay with Aunt Anne until matters are arranged."

"Listen"—he took his stand where she was forced to face him, lowering his voice—"I'll swear by anything you like there never was anything wrong between this girl and myself. Nor with the others. It isn't what you think, no—not even Gioja. You've done as you damned pleased with Barrett, and expected me to swallow it. I've been on the dead level with you, Di. I love you and——"

Something worse than anger in her steady gaze stopped him.

"Just what is it that you want me to do?" she asked, discounting all he had tried to say.

"Stay here. Even if you break with me after this has blown over, stand by now, for Heaven's sake! It will damn everything if people know you came down here and left as soon as you found out. Can't you see that yourself?"

"And I lose all self-respect if I stay."

"Don't say that!" A queer, boyish break came into his tone of entreaty, but she steeled herself against it. "I loved you the first night I ever saw you, Di. Remember? Moonlight and the palm grove and the scent of magnolias. I had just come down to the Beach. I never was any kind of a poet. Maybe I'm a damned stick of a lover, too, but all I can say is you're the only woman who has made me thank God I was a man. And you're my wife!"

The telephone bell rang in the lower hall, and he turned to go down the broad staircase. She heard the opening and closing of the booth door, and suddenly realized that the way lay open for her. Slipping into a long motoring cloak that hid her gray-and-silver negligee, she pulled a close, soft hat over her crumpled hair, and closed the suitcase that lay, still unpacked, on the floor.

It was not ten yet. She could hear Marbury's voice in the booth, muffled and indistinct, but excited. He could not see the stairway or the front entrance doors from the booth. She passed out of the house serenely, feeling only a sense of freedom, of shutting the door deliberately on a past that held only disillusion and irrepressible pain. She thought of Marbury's protestations with almost an impersonal unconcern, as though they had no application to her whatever. If they were true, why had he waited until he was in jeopardy before he came to her to explain? Before to-night he had countered her own contempt with threats about Blair. Now he would make terms on any basis, even trying to rouse the old appeal in her through love.

The wind off the bay caught her as she turned from the curving driveway into the shore road. The great old willows bordering it seemed to sway and lash at her impotently as if to hold her back, she thought with a little shudder. She hurried on below the house grounds to the main road where there was the chance of hailing a passing jitney. It was over a mile to the station. There was a train to the city at ten twenty-two. If she could make that before Marbury tried to follow her, she would be sure of eluding him. She would not go to the Greshams', not at once, anyway. It was not very late. She would call up Blair and have a quiet talk with him. He was the one person to whom she could talk freely. Besides, it was only fair to him, in case Marbury got a wild idea of filing a countersuit and naming him.

She smiled at the absurdity of the thought. An empty car swung around the curving drive and she hailed it. The outside world became a flying blur of tree masses suddenly illumined by the headlights, then lost in shadow. The train was just pulling in to the station as the car stopped.

Once settled in a seat, she stared out of the window, her thoughts focusing on Blair. With every fragment of faith between Marbury and herself outraged by this last act of his, she felt almost a righteous desire to strike back at him. And why not? Blair had always loved her, always had stood in waiting for the hour when she might need him. Had she no personal right to seize her own chance for happiness?

Even as she asked the question, there came the swift, answering suspicion. What happiness could she look for where only retaliation had been the incentive to her own flight? There had been no thought whatever of Blair to urge her on as a dominant factor. No, she told herself pitilessly, she loved Marbury. That was why he had the power to hurt her, to arouse rage and bitterness, this amazing, hot resentment, which seemed to burn every other thought out of its way, that he should so deliberately drag down their love and destroy it.

With Blair there could be merely the relief and comfort of his devotion, the surety that she was everything to him. But was she, after all? Speeding to an inevitable rendezvous, she stared out at the glittering edge westward that was Manhattan, across the flat wastes of made lands swept by the tide, the strips of outlying suburban settlements, and she asked herself the query of all women, can one love ever content the experimental male? Would not time bring simply a repetition of the present situation? What more could she expect than to be merely the woman of the moment!

Arriving at the Pennsylvania Station, she went to a telephone booth and called up Blair at his club. He was not there. Shutting her mind to every impulse of retreat, she took a taxi to his apartment on Madison Avenue. She would put barriers between Marbury and herself

that no reaction on her part could remove. This last affair of his was the end! It had been so idiotic of him to get entangled in a scandal at Willow Way, the place she loved best. During the ride uptown she leaned her head back on the cushions, trying to think clearly; to forget what lay behind her and think only of Blair.

Instead, there came to her only the constant visualizing of Marbury when he had discovered she had gone! To whom had he been talking in the booth? Would he follow her? Would he go to their own town house or to the Greshams'? And when he had discovered that she had left him, what then? He would think of Blair! Or again, what if he had already called up Blair, and had been told he knew nothing of her plans, had no knowledge of where she had gone? He could have said this truthfully. She remembered that Marbury had told her Forbes, the senior member of his law firm, was in Boston. He might be compelled to confer with Blair on the case in his absence. She closed her eyes tightly, pain throbbing behind them, as she tried to think rationally.

The taxi drew up before the building. It was a large, six-story, spacious-appearing, brownstone affair. Its black-and-white, tessellated vestibule belonged to the days when John Drew was the diversion of the late-Victorian matinee girl. Even the elevator was conservative, slow moving, of heavy, carved mahogany with beveled mirrors and velvet-cushioned seat running lengthwise.

Diane had been here before with Ines at several of Blair's bachelor dinners. The tall, light-colored West Indian porter recognized her without surprise. Yes, indeed, Mr. Barrett was in. Should he announce her?

She told him that she was expected. Going up in the elevator, even as she walked along the high-ceiled corridor to

the narrow, deep-set mahogany door at the end of it, her surety of purpose never flagged. This was not the way to face the great adventure of daring, forbidden romance, she told herself. She could not stir up one thrill over the situation, nothing but a sense of relief, of retaliation, of settled courage to go through with it.

Blair himself opened the door at her quick ring. He was in evening dress and appeared oddly disturbed, she thought at first impression. There was an air of suppressed excitement about him, a latent flare of anger in his eyes as if it had just died down. He looked at her silently for a moment, closed the door, and suddenly she lay close in his arms, even as she had so lately lain in Marbury's.

She closed her eyes, feeling his kisses on lips and face and throat, not repulsing him, rather waiting experimentally the effect they were to have upon her. And there was not the slightest response, nothing but pity for him and distaste for his caresses. She drew away with a sense of disappointment. It was like some delayed triumph of Marbury's, this discovery that he had even robbed her senses of all that thrilled to meet desire in another man.

"I thought you would come." Blair tried to steady hand and voice as he lighted a cigarette.

"Then you know?"

He nodded.

"Derry called me up as soon as it was known the girl had disappeared and Hanson accused Marbury. Forbes is in Boston at present. I"—he hesitated—"I was given the case until he gets back on Monday."

She gave a quick gesture with her palms as if she were pushing away something repellent to her. There was a chair by the fireplace that she had always preferred, a high-backed Veronese antique that called for cloth of gold and one of Paul Veronese's

women, luxurious, supremely confident, material, not the slender, white-faced girl who stared from the diamond-studded ring on her left hand to Blair's flushed, taut face.

The chow on the old blue-and-gray rug rose sleepily, frowsy, copper-hued, haughty, regarding her with suspicion.

"Hello, Tao," she said soothingly. "Don't you remember me? Oh, but it's good to be here with you, Blair." He waited in silence, content to watch her. "I went out to Willow Way this afternoon. I had not heard anything at all, you see, until Marbury told me. He asked me to stay there and cover up that scandal for him. I couldn't, I simply couldn't, Blair! You understand, don't you? I have tried to be fair and overlook things, but I think this is about enough."

He spoke with an effort.

"Will you go away with me to-night?"

She met his eyes still with the impersonal, detached feeling that this was not Blair, this man with the twitching muscles, the nervous, beseeching lips, the eyes that seemed to burn with aroused fires as they watched her. Before she could answer he had caught her fast in his arms again, his lips pressed to her throat as she tried to free herself.

"Haven't I waited long enough, Diane?" he whispered. "I knew you'd come to me."

"Wait. Don't, Blair! Let me go!" Her voice was sharp and imperative. She was conscious of being sorry for him, realizing the complete lack in herself of any emotional force to meet this full surrender. "Sit down quietly and talk to me just as you always have. May I have a cigarette, please? Thanks." She leaned her head back wearily as he gave her a light. "I want to talk plainly to you about this, Blair. Perhaps you do know me better than I know myself. I came here the

first thing to-night. I haven't even called up Aunt Anne. Nobody knows that I am in town except you. I ran away while Marbury was telephoning."

He walked across the room to the half-opened window and stood there silently. His eyes were half closed.

"I wanted to see you first, Blair. You can understand that. I"—she chose her words carefully—"I suppose when I came here I intended doing something irrevocable, putting up some final barrier between Marbury and myself, so that I could never go back to him. And I thought of you."

"Well"—he turned to her eagerly—"I'm here. I do understand perfectly, Diane, and I blame you only for putting up with things so long. People don't admire that sort of complaisancy in a wife any more. They despise her for her complicity in a loveless marriage. There is a French boat sailing to-morrow. I can get you on board to-night, and arrange everything for us both. Or would you prefer to have me join you in Paris?"

Paris? A little half smile caught the corners of her lips. He knew the forbidden way and all its turnings. There had been two weeks in Paris, Colonel Dutton had proved. The ash on her cigarette lengthened, and fell upon the Chinese rug.

"Blair," she said, with a quick sigh of released tension, "I'm afraid I'm just a coward. I can't do it, that's all. You're awfully patient and dear with me. I know I'm just a quitter to come here and then crawfish. Remember how you used to call 'Crawfish!' after me when I was afraid to go any farther. Please forgive me! I'd never take a dare if there were real danger, would I?"

"But there's no danger, sweetheart. You can cross alone, you know."

She shook her head, gazing at him steadily.

"I love Marbury—not as he is, of course, but——"

"You mean," he interrupted, "that you're frightened over taking the leap, and ready to clothe your reason in wifely devotion. It's too late for that now, Diane. You said just now that I know you better than you know yourself. You asked me to tell you what to do. I'm not making any appeal to love for myself. We'll just think of you. I am going to put you out of his reach, that's all, so he cannot hide behind you in this latest mess. You can meet Ines in London, stay with her if you like, and I'll join you later on. I'm not asking you to do anything against your own conscience, dear. You're not like other women to me. I've loved you and waited for you to turn to me ever since I was a boy. You know that, don't you, Diane?"

She was looking down at the carved-oak griffin heads on the chair arms, tracing them over delicately with one finger tip. There was a long pause before she said:

"I suppose I do, Blair."

This time she yielded her lips to him almost wearily, a vision of the place she had left stealing before her; the willows, which bordered the lake at the foot of the grounds, swaying in the sea wind. She would always think of them trailing and moaning in whispers to her, as if they would have told of the girl and where she lay.

They would be dragging the lake to-morrow. The face of Velma came back vividly, pink and white, with the gold fluff of hair about it like a baby's. The pity of it! Lips too full, and that weak little pointed chin. How could he? She pushed Blair from her restlessly, and rose. While he was calling up the French-line pier she arranged her loosened hair before the oval, framed mirror near the door. And then the outer bell rang loudly, imperatively.

"Just a minute." Blair laid down the receiver to step across the narrow, high-ceiled hall. "If you want to go in there——" He nodded toward the inner room, but Diane ignored him. She was still thinking of the girl, her mind racing in speculation of all there might have been between her and Marbury.

Velma was only seventeen, eight years younger than herself. How she must have loved him! She herself could never have done such a mad thing, taken her own life merely because love had failed her. Some old inherited flame of high resolve, of spirited revolt against self-pity would have saved her from any such abandon of hopelessness. If she had only come out to Willow Way in time, she would have taken Velma and taught her pride, courage; made her understand that this which seemed the end of all in life was something she would hardly remember in twenty years.

And where, Diane asked herself searchingly, where had she ever learned the ancient wisdom of compensation? Would this agony of tortured love which she was enduring now recur to her some day merely as a passing phase of another self? A verse of Rossetti slipped through her mind:

From perfect grief there need not be

Wisdom or even memory:

One thing then learned remains to me,

The Woodspurge has a cup of three.

And then Blair's voice caught her attention. It seemed muffled and restrained. Then came another voice, Marbury's. She listened with a thrill of amazed relief.

"Derry said I had better make sure and see you to-night. That report is verified. After I telephoned you this evening I called up Block Island on long distance and got the hotel where she's staying. Spending her honeymoon with Larsen, same fellow her father got her away from, keeps the garage back of the station. Funny

twist, isn't it? Call up Forbes and tell him there's no case, will you? I'm in a hurry."

"I'll get him in Boston at once." Blair's tone was cool and steady. "Won't you come in?"

"Thanks." She held her breath at the jubilant ring in his tone. "Diane came in ahead of me. I'm on my way up to the house now to join her. Good night."

The door closed after him. Blair's face was a study in lines as he re-entered the living room. Diane's eyes were full of a brilliant, glowing triumph, something he could not even fathom, as she caught up her cloak and fastened it about her.

"You lied to me, didn't you?" She smiled at him. "You knew before I got here that the girl had been found, and you never told me that Marbury was innocent."

"It was merely a rumor——"

"But you knew. It was you he was telephoning to when I left the house, and you would have let me take the boat to-morrow without giving him even one fighting chance. You know, Blair, there is a queer strain in you, after all. I never believed it when Aunt Anne said so 'after the Dutton affair, but she was right. You don't win women that way. Get me a taxi."

"You're not going back to him?" He could not repress a sneer.

"Just as quick as God will let me!" she almost whispered.

All the way up the Avenue she planned what she would do. There would be no one to say when she had arrived. The servants all slept on the top floor. She had a key to the side entrance. The chance of an extra fare sent the car speeding along the cleared street. It was after midnight. There was a bare chance that she would reach the house before Marbury. She had faced the trip away without the quick-

ening of a pulse beat, but now it seemed as if her heart were pounding for release with some new, glorious tempo.

He had never lost faith in her, never doubted, when he found she had departed from Willow Way, but that she had returned to their own house in town. The old, aloof self in her reminded her with grim humor that she had been the one to break faith. If he had not happened to stop at Blair's, she might have been gone by morning, half a world away in miles, and all eternity in love.

At the side entrance on Seventy-fourth Street, she paid the fare, and unlocked the double doors, first the iron grilled one, then the heavy oak door. There were no lights, no sign of Marbury. Noiselessly she ascended the two back flights of stairs, found her way into her own suite, slipped off her cloak and gown, and into a loose robe of white satin and black marabou. As the throb of a motor stopping at the curb came from below, she loosened her hair, stepped into the little boudoir overlooking the moonlit reaches of the Park, and hid herself on the window seat behind the long, silk curtains.

Marbury had seen the gleam of shaded light from her rooms. A great thankfulness relieved the tension in his

brain as he entered the house. How fair and decent women were, he thought, how straight the line they followed! But then, it was easy for a woman like Di. He had known she would be there. He turned the glass knob of her door noiselessly. She would be asleep probably. No. The small lamp beside her bed was still lighted. Her gloves lay on the table where she had tossed them. He listened a moment, spoke her name.

She heard him, but waited, putting from her the moment of reality.

"Di," he called again softly, entreatingly, "you are here, aren't you?"

He stepped impatiently into the front room, a disturbing jumble of old blue and pearl, a room Marguerite of Valois might have loved to dream in, with the perfume of white violets haunting it. And here her presence seemed to reach him without words. As he swept back the draperies and knelt beside her, Diane lifted her head, her hands caressing his hair as he told her brokenly the news.

"I told you everything was all right, Di, and it's the same with all the rest. There's nothing to it, on the level! I love you, and there's no one else in the whole world for either of us, is there?"

"No one!" she whispered back.

